

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. CHARLES W. STENHOLM

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this very timely hearing. One of the most important functions of this committee is to conduct oversight of USDA's activities, and I appreciate the seriousness with which you have approached that task, as evidenced by today's hearing. Let me also take this opportunity to thank Secretary Veneman for being present to testify today. I am sure this has been a very busy month, Madame Secretary, and I appreciate the time commitment you made by appearing today.

Given last month's discovery of a BSE-positive cow within our borders—a cow that had been imported from Canada—this is obviously a very important hearing. There have been a number of significant actions and regulatory responses by USDA over the past several weeks. Some of these actions are common-sense and have spurred many to ask why they weren't implemented in the first place. One such example would be establishing a new test-and-hold requirement for sampled animals. In any case, I want to commend USDA for taking these actions and to say that I am deeply appreciative of the work done by so many hundreds of USDA staff over the Christmas holiday season. Generating a timely response to this incident required a great deal of sacrifice by a large number of USDA employees and I want them to know that many in Congress are grateful to them. Despite the good work of many USDA employees on the ground, however, there are a number of questions about USDA's response to this situation that I hope will be answered today.

The first relates to the place of "sound science" in USDA's policy response. Let me emphasize that I am deeply committed to the principal that we should use the best available science to drive all Government regulatory policy. Private companies may make decisions that are unsound scientifically in order to market products or meet special consumer interests, and that is their prerogative. The USDA as a governmental entity, on the other hand, must make objective decisions based on sound science alone. That is the only safe and sure road for us to follow where regulations are concerned.

Let me also say that I respect the right of some of my colleagues to interject humane/animal rights issues into the discussion of our food processing industry. We should recognize these issues for what they are, however, and not confuse them with the sound science policies that make our food safer.

Second, I am concerned about the efficacy of the new surveillance program for BSE. Let me be clear: I am NOT questioning the safety of our food supply. The chance of BSE-infected tissue getting into our food supply is miniscule. I am, however, concerned about the ability of our Government to provide credible statistical evidence of the fact that our home-grown beef herd remains free of BSE. Recent actions by USDA that limit access to high-risk ani-

mals, and questions about past testing schemes, are a significant concern in that regard.

On the trade front, we also have two major concerns. First, and most importantly, how do we reassure our customers around the world that our beef products remain safe? In my humble opinion, we do so by maintaining science-based rules and explaining why we think those science-based rules ensure a safe meat supply.

A second trade concern is how we treat countries that are exporting beef to the United States. On January 7, FSIS sent letters to each of the 10 countries that export beef to the US under FSIS import authority. (The countries are: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, New Zealand, and Uruguay). The letters informed these countries of the downer ban and of the intention of FSIS to issue regulations on removal and segregation of specified risk materials, advanced meat recovery, and captive bolt stunning. The letters also state that the exporting countries will have to adopt these or equivalent measures for beef products exported to the United States.

These new processing requirements will, of course, be subject to WTO rules mandating that such requirements be science-based, and I will be interested to hear the Secretary's comments on how the rules will be implemented in a manner consistent with our WTO obligations.

Many reports indicate that consumer confidence in our food safety systems remains high. When all is said and done on the BSE issue, consumers understand that our U.S. herd is BSE-free. We need to ensure that actions taken by USDA will enhance our food safety systems and not merely address perceptions. Failure to do so could come back to haunt us in two ways: on the trade front, perceptions might cause other countries to impose non-science based requirements, and on the home front, consumers could become disillusioned with our food safety systems if we institute measures that don't actually enhance food safety.

These issues and others will need to be reviewed in similar hearings over the coming months. Today, at the beginning of this new session, we are making a good start and I look forward to an open and frank discussion. I also look forward to working with the administration to craft a sound, defensible BSE response as we move into the future.